

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Pedagógiai és Pszichológiai Kar

**USING INFORMATIN AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES  
IN HUNGARIAN TEACHER TRAINING COURSES:  
THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR**

**AZ INFORMÁCIÓS ÉS KOMMUNIKÁCIÓ ESZKÖZÖK HASZNÁLATA A  
TANÁR-TOVÁBBKÉPZÉSBEN: A FACILITÁTOR SZEREPE**

Dissertation summary  
A doktori (PhD) értekezés tézisei

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ELTE PPK Neveléstudományi doktori iskola  
Nyelvpedagógia program

Budapest, 2012

## 1 TOPIC AND AMIS

This dissertation is concerned with the roles and tasks of teachers in an e-learning context, who are generally referred to as facilitators, e-moderators, or mentors. The definitions and the different factors influencing the attributes of online course are discussed in the thesis. The particular concern of the work was to establish the roles of facilitators in the design and implementation of e-learning courses for adult learners. To address this issue, three online in-service teacher training courses were observed, coded, and analyzed from the point of the facilitators' presence and roles. All the 29 facilitators in the courses were interviewed to explore their views of the different roles they had to cope with during the courses, and on the aspects of they found useful is the facilitator training they participated in.

The present study is investigating the main question: **What is the role of facilitators in online teacher training courses?** In order to address this issue, the present research project was guided by the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What is the impact of facilitators on the success of the participants in online teacher training courses?

RQ2: What is the role of face-to face meetings of facilitators and participants in online teacher training courses?

RQ3: What is the role of the facilitator as a group leader in online teacher training courses?

RQ4: What is the role of facilitators in the interaction in online teacher training courses?

RQ5: What is the role of facilitators in the evaluation and feedback procedures in online teacher training courses?

RQ6: What is the role of facilitator training before the online teacher training courses start?

## **2 OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION**

This research has significance in that it has the potential to contribute to the theory of online instruction by providing both quantitative and qualitative empirical data on the roles of facilitators in online teacher training courses. Through the use of mixed research methodology (Dörnyei, 2007), a more inclusive understanding of online instruction can evolve, as well as the practice of data mining techniques and the application of grounded theory in researching e-learning related topics can be tested. Another important outcome of the present study is its special focus on group dynamics in an online environment, as a basic and less researched component of online courses (Paloff & Pratt, 2001).

In Chapter 1, the technological advances are reviewed and the need for longitudinal research is explained. Then, the areas and the specific context of the present thesis are outlined.

Chapter 2 offers a review of the relevant literature by surveying the relevant areas of facilitation: the learning environment, the individual learners, the study groups, and the facilitators as well. Facilitator roles and training needs are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 3 offers an in-depth discussion of research methods applied in the thesis. First, the choice of research methodology is justified, which is followed by the description of research implementation and the case studies. Finally, the methods of data collection and analysis are presented.

Chapter 4 discusses the results of the research projects, first focusing on the quantitative results gained from the activity logs, then describing the qualitative results of the interviews data.

Chapter 5 discusses the results of the analysis by answering the research questions of the thesis. The learning environment, the characteristics of individual learners and groups,

the roles of face-to-face meetings, the modes of interactions and communication, and the evaluation and feedback techniques will be overviewed.

Chapter 6 offers a conclusion to the thesis by summarizing the findings, listing the practical implication, as well as the limitations of the study, and suggesting directions for further research.

### 3 METHODS

#### 3.1. Research methodology

The study followed the mixed methodology research traditions. On one hand, the basic research question to answer was “What is the role of online facilitators?”, which can be best answered by collecting qualitative data on the courses where facilitators work. In the courses studied for this research project, logging the data of the courses was technically possible to do. All facilitator logs and hits were recorded first, and before the data was analysed, each facilitator was interviewed about their roles in the course. . The sources of data in the present study, the reason for collecting the data, and the application of the data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Sources of data in the study*

<b>Data sources</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>Application</b>
Data logs	The activity logs in the system offer a day-to-day record of facilitator work.	Statistical analysis of numerical data, qualitative analysis of verbal data.
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews gave the facilitators an opportunity to elaborate on the questions, evaluate their own work and explain their activities.	Constant comparative method of interview data to establish categories for facilitator roles and activities.
Documents	Course descriptions of the three case studies and the facilitator training courses.	Establishing the aims and outcomes of the courses.

### **3.2 Setting and participants**

The three case studies for the present research were chosen as the first early attempts to train teachers and adult learners to English as a foreign language using and ICT methodology. All the facilitators in the courses received training before the courses began, and access was provided to the facilitator training material as well. Two of the courses were run by universities and one by a major governmental institution, with a total number of participants totaling to nearly 4000 learners. The three courses chosen for this research were all e-learning courses, but blended the course to various levels. Some facilitators did not meet the online participants face-to-face at all, other groups met at the beginning and at the end of the course, whereas there were some groups in the courses that besides completing course tasks and using the communication functions offered by the learning management system, also met regularly, typically once a month.

### **3.3 Data collection procedures**

The collection of empirical data was chosen to be applied with the longitudinal examination of the three e-learning teacher training language courses. Activity logs were recorded and analysed using quantitative data analysis procedures; whereas qualitative data were collected from the interviews with the facilitators and analysed using the constant comparative method of analysis.

The activity logs contained data on the total frequency of facilitator hits, total frequency of accessing groups, total number of messages posted, and the total number of synchronous discussions attended. A descriptive statistical analysis of the data was applied to show the online behaviour patterns and online presence of facilitators. Due to the exploratory nature of the present research, as in the case of most applied linguistic research, semi-structured interviews were chosen to be the most suitable for data collection. The

facilitator interview contained 26 questions arranged around six broad topics. The first four questions referred to the facilitator's previous training and experience, and served as warm-up questions to set the tone for the interview. The facilitators also had a chance to start off from a positive note and express their interest and expertise in the project, and also during this phase of the interview they became comfortable with the recorder. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian with the Hungarian facilitators; and in English with the international facilitators in the Precise Project.

## **4 A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **4.1. The role of facilitators in facilitating individual learners**

It was found that facilitators have a positive impact on participants' motivation, progress and achievements in the online setting. Techniques were quoted from the facilitator interviews to give some examples of how facilitation of individual learners worked in the three courses. Facilitators can benefit a lot from knowing the background and individual characteristics and circumstances of learners (previous experience, ICT skills, access to technology). Based on this, and relying on the activity logs of the learning management systems facilitators play a significant role in offering support to individual learners in e-learning courses.

### **4.2. The role of facilitators in the face-to-face meetings**

The data analysis showed contradictory findings in connection with the roles facilitators play in face-to-face meetings. Due to the conflicting interests of course providers, learners, and facilitators, alternative views were identified on the role of meetings. On the other hand,

the facilitators interviewed in the projects had different opinions about the roles of facilitator-learner meetings (Berge, 2005).

#### **4.3. The role of facilitators as group leaders**

Facilitators believe that groups can empower individual learners and can enhance the results achieved in online instruction (Anderson, 2004). Nonetheless, they need to have a better understanding of how groups work, and how they can act as catalysts in the formation of groups in an online environment. The analysis of the data suggests that groups are not static during the online courses, but constantly develop. Group development, however, is more complex and less predictable than suggested by the models of Salmon (2000) and Moulen (2007). The participation data and the qualitative interviews are not sufficient data to arrive to a full understanding of group dynamics in online courses, but the patterns of participation showed similar fluctuation in all three courses observed.

#### **4.4. The role of interaction in online teacher training courses**

The course participants and facilitators in the three courses used both synchronous and asynchronous ways of communication. The results showed that the presence of the teacher promoted student interaction not only with the content, but also among students and the teacher as well. Similarly, the communication patterns in the courses were evaluated as being useful mostly both by the learners and the facilitators.

#### **4.5. The role of evaluation and feedback techniques**

Evaluation and feedback techniques varied in the three courses, but were considered to be compulsory elements of online courses as well. Facilitators explained that adult learners were motivated by being tested, but the form of the tests was not appreciated. It is suggested that new types of test taking methods should be applied in online courses that match the methodology of the courses.

#### **4.6. The role of facilitator training**

All facilitators agreed on the necessity of special training for online instructors. They found it important to become familiar with the learning management system, the content of the course, and specific facilitating techniques in supporting individuals and groups of learners in online adult courses.

During the analysis of the data another category of facilitator roles emerged. The importance of the learning management system was referred to in the interviews, and it was found that although decisions in connection with the learning management system, course design, course content, and course structure are made by the course providers, facilitator roles are heavily influenced by them. Facilitators either have to spend more time on administration and adjusting course content to the needs of the learners, or decide not to take responsibility and try to cope with learner demotivation (Salmon. 2000). It can be considered by the course providers to receive feedback on these issues from the facilitators and adjust the course to their needs as well.



## 5 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study aimed at examining the roles facilitators play in online adult teacher training courses based on the quantitative and qualitative data from three courses delivered in Hungary. The results cannot be considered representative of either the Hungarian context or a more general understanding of facilitation. Some practical considerations emerged from the thesis, and these are the following:

1. Facilitator roles should be considered specific to the course characteristics. Consequently, appropriate training can only be provided for facilitators if it contains both the course-specific variables and the practical techniques facilitators can use in the online courses.
2. Facilitators should play a role in creating the online learning environment by either being consulted before the course is set up, or by shifting their roles to creating or recreating some of the elements of the LMS to cater for the specific learner needs.
3. Facilitators should understand and learn how their personality changes with the delivery system. As they act as role models of successful online learners and teachers for course participants, the techniques of the 'online self-creation' could be explored.
4. Regarding the research methodology used in the thesis, it is stated that the analysis of quantitative data regarding online courses does not result in a deep understanding of facilitation. Although activity logs and data mining techniques can be applied very well in learning more about the online behaviour of course participants, qualitative data collection techniques are also necessary to be applied.

## **6 DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This thesis provided a number of insights in relation to the practical and theoretical issues of e-learning courses. The theoretical recommendations presented in the thesis deserve further study on both existing online courses and new courses in the future. Addressing these four concrete research questions might bring considerable benefits:

1. How can understanding the roles of facilitators in online courses contribute to the design and implementation of learning management systems?
2. What are the individual and professional characteristics of facilitators that are necessary for successful online instruction?
3. How far can the findings of this study be replicated in different contexts, e.g. in blended courses, or courses offered for younger learners?
4. How will Web 2.0 tools effect the methodology of online courses and the roles of facilitators and learners?

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